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## DRAMATIZATION OF SCHOOL CLASSICS<sup>1</sup>

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A neighborly colleague, who occasionally brings me chips from his workshop, told me the other day that one of his boys who had failed to prepare his *Ivanhoe* lesson had offered the excuse that he didn't like *Ivanhoe* because it was too stylish. Now, the boy or girl who finds *Ivanhoe* too stylish looms very large on the horizon of the English teacher today. Literature, in the scholar's sense of the word, is facing the challenge of the magazine and the newspaper, not only in the home but in the English classroom. The demand for literature that will interest must be met. On that point we are all, I think, agreed, though the dust of battle has darkened the air of late in controversies as to how to bring about the meeting between our Mahomets and our mountain.

One simple method of procedure is, of course, to give the pupil books that he will find attractive and that will not, like *Ivanhoe*, intimidate him by their excess of stylishness—the best, perhaps, of the books of the day and the hour. I should like to say something about the possibility of approaching the problem from a different angle. If we shift the emphasis from medium to method, there is, I believe, a fighting chance of making the pupil like a good deal of what has permanent value, and a strong hope that the goal of interest may be attained without our being compelled to substitute the harmlessly entertaining and the pleasantly popular for “the things that are most excellent.”

I do not wish to present a plea for the retention of all that has belonged to the last pedagogical generation in the teaching of our subject. I am quite aware that we have frequently been guilty of cruelty to literature. But there is some danger that, in the violence of our reaction, we may get rid not only of our bad methods

<sup>1</sup> Delivered before the New York City Association of Teachers of English, May 18, 1912.

but of much good boy-and-girl literature as well—which seems a little like burning down the house to drive out the rats. Because our literature lessons have sometimes been nine-tenths teacher and one-tenth pupil, because we have been meticulous and have perhaps taught *Ivanhoe* by asking such questions as, “If the tournament took place on October fourth, give the dates of the archery contest, the storming of Torquilstone, and the banquet at Ashby,” it should not, in expiation of our sins, be necessary to do penance by resolving to have no further traffic with the people of Scott’s world.

I should like to see, as a result of the new light that has dawned for many of us, the books that we English teachers care for, not only with the maturity of our intellect as men and women, but also with the spirit of youth that must persist in us if we care at all, given a final chance before being dismissed as enemies to the happiness of our young people. And it is chiefly for the sake of our beginners that I should like to see the chance given, since so many leave us after the first year, and since, whether they go or stay, their attitude toward books is pretty clearly determined by that time. It is, therefore, about work with first-year pupils that I wish to speak, with the specific purpose of discussing certain devices for adding interest to the work of that year.

When I say that I have found the dramatic method capable of being used to excellent advantage in the teaching of first-year literature, I speak with fear and trembling, for the words *dramatic* and *dramatization* on a teacher’s lips too often suggest, if not pretentiousness of aim, a lack of sense of values in effort. Dramatic colors for use in the classroom need to be mixed with as much common sense as the teacher is master of, to be worth a canvas. In default of a better word, however, I must perforce make use of the term dramatization, trusting not to convey the impression that the English class should be used for the exploitation of star reciters or youngsters with leanings toward theatricalism. On the contrary, dramatics as part of the literature period ought to result in making the class a democracy rather than an aristocracy or an oligarchy. It should, perhaps, hardly be necessary to say that the method in question requires no special temperamental qualification on the teacher’s part, such as that possessed by the faculty dramatic

coach. The common, or garden, teacher who has for equipment nothing more than the interest in the drama that no one of us lacks can, after a very little practice, play the impresario without difficulty.

In the first term *Ivanhoe* and in the second *The Odyssey* have been the chief victims of my recent experiments. Two years ago, I found some *Ivanhoe* classes in my program, after having, through some accident of fate, been without *Ivanhoe* work for some time. I have a wise English friend, once a schoolmaster, who is a great traveler, although his holidays are never longer than a few weeks. He writes delightful essays about his travels, and in one of them he says: "I will never go the same route three days running, whether to business or to Parliament, or back to the haven of home. Monotony—monotony is the lurking demon to outwit and avoid; monotony ages you; wandering keeps you young." Now, I thoroughly believe in applying this principle to teaching. I try never to take precisely the same route through a book two terms running, and this time, in search of a new road, I strayed upon the path of informal dramatics arranged from *Ivanhoe*. That is to say, the first part of every lesson was devoted to a rendering of the dialogue of one of the scenes by as many pupils as the action called for. The planning of this work is exceedingly simple, thanks to Scott. There are innumerable scenes in *Ivanhoe* which, with the slightest possible twist, can be converted into self-contained dramatic episodes. The archery contest, the escape of Cedric, Gurth at the house of Isaac, the friar and the Black Knight in the hermitage, Gurth among the robbers—a score of others will suggest themselves to you, and the whole book can be gone through in this way down to the final scene of the leave-taking between Rebecca and Rowena. When our allotted time with the book was over, every member of both classes, bright or dull, weak-voiced or declamatory, had had a part to perform, only slightly removed from a thinking part in some cases, but still a part. I don't know which was the greater revelation to me in this experience, the perfect Golconda of dramatic material in *Ivanhoe* or the rough, but in many cases, real power displayed by the boys in handling it. As for the boys' point of view, which, after all, is the one that matters, I don't believe they

formulated any criticism, but I am sure that they lived their *Ivanhoe*.

This type of work calls for isolation of the dialogue, memorizing the speeches whenever they are not unduly long—in that case cutting them judiciously—and thinking out appropriate action. The memorizing sounds like much more of a task than it really is. As a famous critic said of the allegory in *The Faerie Queene*, it won't bite anyone. The lines almost say themselves. As for the action, all the classroom's a stage, and all its belongings, properties. Richard and Friar Tuck contentedly quaff canary from ink-wells; Gurth and the Miller have a bout with pointers as quarter-staves; the seats on the middle aisle provide places for Prince John's banqueters, and a fearful joy is snatched from the invasion of the teacher's platform, which serves now as the ruins of Torquilstone, now as the cave of Polyphemus, according to the requirements of the occasion. I might perhaps add that thinking parts, such as the swine of Circe and the suitors of Penelope (who are allowed modified growls) are very popular and are felt to contribute greatly to the effectiveness of the performance. Occasionally, of course, it is thought that some slight accessory ought to be imported from the outer world. At present, the most approved instrument for boring out the eye of Polyphemus is an ancient baseball bat, the property of the class team, and my first impersonator of Gurth profoundly impressed his audience by producing his father's check-book and solemnly recording therein his monetary transactions with Isaac. And so, like the audiences who saw Agincourt fought and won on the platform of the Globe Theater, we "sit and see, minding true, things by what their mockeries be."

Our incursion into the dramatic field by way of *Ivanhoe* called for no work in composition, but with *The Odyssey* there are more opportunities for making oral composition a part of the exercises. Renderings of the *Odyssey* dialogues, as they appear in the text, are practicable but require considerable effort in memorizing, and when this type of work becomes burdensome to the pupil it loses its value, to my mind. In this case it is as Stevenson says, "To miss the joy is to miss all." The Homeric deities seldom express themselves with the terseness which would commend their speeches

to the New York high-school boy as suitable passages to be learned. I have, therefore, tried in my *Odyssey* classes to kill several birds with one stone by having the boys manage their own dramatizations. Making a bold attempt to transplant the methods of the Italian *improvisatore* to the classroom, I have had groups of boys work out into dialogue form, sometimes impromptu, sometimes as assigned exercises, incidents given in the text in third person narrative; or again, they have manipulated incidents developed in the text but requiring adaptation or condensation. A special armor of temporary insensitiveness needs, by the way, to be added to the teacher's equipment during these experiments; curious infelicities in the way of combinations of Homeric epithets and up-to-date New Yorkese occur not infrequently. A method of relating these exercises to written composition is to have the incidents developed into written dialogue by the entire class. Several of the most successful compositions may be rendered and the critical faculty sharpened by instituting comparisons. It should be understood that no one of these exercises need occupy more than ten minutes, and that no unduly sustained effort is required.

Summing up the advantages which I believe to be derived from the judicious use of simple dramatic work in the teaching of literature, I should say, first, that it makes the literature belong to the pupils in a very real way. Characters are not remote to the boy who has impersonated them or dealt with them in objective fashion. Ulysses and Wamba cease to be mere names to the pupils under those circumstances; they are gentlemen of their acquaintance. Then it furnishes an opportunity for self-expression—which needs no pedagogical justification. The fact that every member of the class can take part in work of this type differentiates it from the more careful and finished rendering which constitutes the fine flower of school dramatics. Undoubtedly the boys themselves recognize the difference between their own attempts and the achievements of the best-trained actors of the school, but, though their classroom performance may be a poor thing, it is their own, and, unlike Gellet Burgess' lyric hero, they would rather be than see one. They have, too, more of a footing in the world of the imagination for having had some share, however slight, in its doings,

just as we all like to believe that the horny-handed men of Athens were broader-minded citizens for having paid their dramatic tribute to the Duke. A by-product of the work is the improvement of the vocabulary through memorizing speeches, not as dead extracts to be recited to the teacher and then blissfully dismissed from the mind, but as fragments of a slice of life.

Lastly comes the gain in interest. I can quote no direct expression of opinion on the part of my boys. I have purposely made no definite inquiries. But, as a skilful swimmer instinctively knows when he is making his way successfully through his chosen element, so a teacher to whom some years of experience have brought a certain sensitiveness to reactions will know whether the day is lost or won; and above all, he will know whether the voice that is heard in the land is the voice of the sluggard or the voice of the willing worker. What I have tried to do with this first-year work is, as I hope I have succeeded in making plain, very unpretentious, and my results have been sufficiently crude; but, at least, the joy of living has not been absent from the classroom during the process, and that, perhaps, may be counted as gain.